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Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 18 July 2008, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. Hoscheit (Vice-President) ..... (Luxembourg)

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In the absence of Mr. Mérorès (Haiti), Mr. Hoscheit (Luxembourg), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits (*continued*)

(b) Review and coordination of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the least developed countries for the decade 2001-2010 (*continued*) (E/2008/61)

1. **Mr. Diarra** (Special Adviser for Africa and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the decade 2001-2010 (E/2008/61), said that the report assessed the progress made in achieving the international goals and targets set out in the Programme of Action adopted in 2000 at the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, and reviewed the commitments of the least developed countries and their development partners in the seven interlinked areas outlined in paragraph 2.

2. The strong economic performance of the least developed countries had continued. Most of them, except those in the Pacific, had met or were on track to meet, the growth and investment targets of the Brussels Programme of Action by 2010. Progress towards human development targets had been noticeable in health and education, but less so in access to water and sanitation, owing to chronic underinvestment in the service delivery infrastructure in rural areas and rapid population growth in urban areas. Also, less progress than previously thought had been made in gender parity in education, and, in many of the countries, no progress at all in reducing maternal mortality. The statistics indicated that almost 50 per cent of the population in half of the countries in question lived in extreme poverty, and malnutrition also seemed to be worsening, seriously jeopardizing the achievement of the overarching objective of the Programme of Action to halve the proportion of those living in extreme poverty and hunger in the least developed countries by 2010. In at least 26 of them, that threatened to destabilize the political situation and trigger social unrest.

3. Almost 72 per cent of the population in the least developed countries lived in rural areas and depended on agriculture for employment, income and subsistence. Yet that sector remained underdeveloped and productivity had been declining, with the result that many of those countries, net exporters of agricultural products in the 1960s, had become net importers by the early 1990s. Forty-seven of the 50 least developed countries were classified by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as low-income food-deficit countries and 20 of them as countries in food crisis, requiring urgent humanitarian assistance. Rising global food prices had further increased food bills and reduced foreign exchange in those countries.

4. The report made a number of policy recommendations to address both the impact and the causes of high food prices, with a view to ensuring long-term food security and the eradication of poverty and hunger. The short-term strategy proposed included immediate, scaled-up humanitarian assistance to countries in food crisis, closing a $750-million gap in the World Food Programme (WFP) budget; social protection programmes, such as cash support, food-for-work programmes and school feeding programmes; and loans and crop-insurance schemes for small farmers.

5. The medium-term strategy proposed included improving the access of farmers to financing and markets, enabling them to purchase the agricultural inputs, machinery and tools and other innovations for obtaining higher yields; investment in better irrigation, transport infrastructure, electricity and research and development; and improvement of market information systems.

6. In the long run, the State-led green revolution should facilitate the transition to a high-value agricultural revolution led by the private sector. The proposed long-term strategy sought to ensure food security through full trade liberalization, which could significantly increase commodity prices and income for the least developed countries, and sought industrial improvements in the processing of agricultural products, light manufactures and, ultimately, high-technology exports.

7. The recommendations in the report were by no means exhaustive but they suggested a general direction. While individual paths would vary, the least developed countries needed to create wealth and decent

jobs and be able to compete on the international market.

8. **Ms. Greenaway** (Observer for Antigua and Barbuda), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, observed that the report painted a mixed picture, showing some modest if precarious gains, but should give renewed impetus to implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action. The Group of 77 and China continued to view it as the framework for a strong global partnership between the least developed countries and their development partners, vital for the achievement of national development goals set by the countries themselves and indeed of all the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The least developed countries had done their part in trying to create enabling national environments and it now remained for the development partners to give greater support.

9. The uneven achievement of the Brussels Programme targets remained a matter of deep concern. The areas of weakness — access to water and sanitation, education, maternal mortality — were obvious. Even more disconcerting was the lack of progress in making trade a tool for poverty reduction and sustainable development in the least developed countries, and it was crucial to revive the stalled Doha Round of trade negotiations. The number of people living in extreme poverty remained alarmingly high in the least developed countries and malnutrition was worsening. That underscored the importance of implementing all targets under the Programme of Action and under MDGs 1 and 8.

10. The report highlighted the impact that current and emerging crises would have on the ability of the least developed, and indeed all developing, countries to advance their development agendas. Now more than ever a concerted effort was required by the United Nations system, including the international financial institutions, to combat the combined negative impact of the food crisis, the financial crisis, slowing global economic growth, rising fuel prices and climate change, compounded by declining official development assistance (ODA) levels.

11. The Secretary-General's report highlighted increased agricultural productivity as a necessary medium-term response to the rising cost of food. The Group of 77 and China were of the view that it should be a short-, medium- and long-term response, and called for greater investment in physical infrastructure and technological development. The Brussels Programme of Action had invited the General Assembly to consider holding a fourth United Nations conference on the least developed countries towards the end of the decade, and the preparations for the conference should begin.

12. **Ms. Jahan** (Observer for Bangladesh) said that the Secretary-General's report indicated some progress in human development in the least developed countries and steady advances in governance, but significant lags in areas like maternal mortality, access to water and sanitation or gender parity and, most dismayingly, a high prevalence of poverty. Structural weaknesses in the economies of those countries and their lack of the capacities needed for sustained economic growth and development were part of the problem.

13. The least developed countries were highly vulnerable to both internal and external shocks. The food crisis alone would drive 100 million more people into poverty and hunger, and those in the least developed countries, where poor households spent nearly 70 per cent of their income on food, would be the hardest hit. Those countries, because their crucial agricultural sectors were underdeveloped, were now net importers of agricultural and food products, and had billion-dollar trade deficits. Increased assistance as soon as possible by the United Nations system and all donors was imperative, and consideration should be given to the action proposed by the Secretary-General's High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis. Climate change, another big challenge for the least developed countries, could put another 50 million people at risk for hunger by 2020. The energy-intensive economies in those countries were also vulnerable to higher energy prices, and they needed access to modern energy technology at an affordable price.

14. Trade was also critically important for the least developed countries, and, with only a 1 per cent share in global trade, they needed help in the form of the removal of tariff and non-tariff restrictions and artificial standards imposed by the industrialized countries, and the assurance of free market access for their products in both North-South and South-South trade. Trade-related technical assistance was urgently needed, and their accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) should be simplified.

15. The developed countries must fulfil their ODA commitment targets by 2010 and give well-focused ODA as direct budgetary support in a predictable and flexible manner. All the least developed countries should be made eligible for debt-relief programmes, and should receive unconditional assistance in sustaining their debt; and all their outstanding debt, both bilateral and multilateral, should be written off without further delay.

16. The special circumstances of the least developed countries were not being adequately reflected in the various reports of the Secretary-General relating to economic and social issues: each report should devote a section to analysing their progress on a sectoral basis. Also, at the next session of the General Assembly, a decision should be made to organize the fourth United Nations conference on the least developed countries.

17. **Mr. Yao** Wenlong (China), welcoming the good economic performance of the least developed countries in recent years, their advances in health and education and the expectation that most of them would meet the Brussels growth and investment targets by 2010, said that determined development efforts by the countries themselves as well as assistance by the international community had made those results possible. Nevertheless, the least developed countries had to overcome fundamental weaknesses before they could sustain economic and social development. The recent global economic and financial turmoil made their development even more uncertain. Rising food prices alone would plunge a significant proportion of their populations back into poverty and could even lead to political destabilization and social unrest, and they would be incapable of dealing with the severe challenges of rising oil prices and climate change as well.

18. It was the shared responsibility of the international community, and an imperative, to take concerted action to help the least developed countries in a number of areas. First, ODA should be increased to a level that would support the economic and social development targets of the Brussels Programme of Action. The developed countries in particular must honour their development assistance commitments and ensure stable and predictable funding. Secondly, there must be a focused response to the food crisis, with short-term increases in emergency food assistance to the least developed countries, and long-term reductions in the agricultural subsidies and protectionist trade measures that had distorted the international agricultural market, as well as increased support for the agricultural production of those countries, in order to help them move towards food self-sufficiency. Thirdly, trade preferences for the least developed countries should be steadily expanded, to raise their share of international trade above the current less than 1 per cent. Without more diversified exports, they would see their trade share dwindle further, and the developed countries must accord them duty-free and quota-free treatment for at least 97 per cent of their tariff lines, guaranteeing greater access for their products.

19. China itself had done much to help the least developed countries. Since 1950, as part of its South-South cooperation, it had made them the major beneficiaries of its many and varied development projects and training offers. In recent years, it had expanded its debt relief, trade preferences, personnel training and technical cooperation in support of the least developed countries and would continue to honour the commitments it had made under the Brussels Programme of Action.

20. **Mr. Djebou** (Benin) said that one of the objectives of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries, to contribute to the renovation and invigoration of partnership between the least developed countries and their development partners by promoting mutual and shared responsibility for the timely realization of the seven commitments of the Brussels Programme of Action, would be easy to achieve if the external assistance strategies of the development partners were aligned with the least developed countries' national policies and strategies. However, the annual reviews by the Council of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010 had consistently showed that there was still much to be done, despite the least developed countries' efforts to maintain an enabling environment for foreign direct investment and the financing of the development activities contained in the Brussels Programme of Action. Since it was important to examine the reasons for that lack of progress, he suggested that a future report of the Secretary-General might consider why international support was not always provided in a timely manner to assist the least developed countries in their development efforts. It would also be useful to explore ways of achieving greater coordination and

coherence between the organizations of the United Nations system and other multilateral organizations.

21. Given that many of the least developed countries would probably not achieve the goals and objectives of the Brussels Programme of Action, as noted at the high-level meeting on the midterm comprehensive global review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010, bold steps needed to be taken to improve their economic situation taking into account globalization, trade, foreign direct investment and many other important issues. In that connection, the recommendations of the Cotonou Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010 should not be ignored and the Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States needed to take more vigorous action to achieve the expected results. He called on the Secretary-General to enhance the efficiency of the Office of the High Representative in order for it to fulfil its mandate of undertaking advocacy work on behalf of the least developed countries and ensuring coordination of the follow-up of the Brussels Programme of Action.

22. **Mr. Eisa Mohamed** (Sudan) said that the Brussels Programme of Action was a comprehensive poverty reduction and development strategy tailored to the special needs of the least developed countries and their development partners. With just a few years left before the end of the Programme, the international community was faced with multiple challenges arising from factors including financial instability, slowing global economic growth and rising food and fuel prices, as well as the negative impact of environmental degradation and climate change on economic growth, sustainable development and poverty reduction, particularly in the least developed countries.

23. While the Sudan had made progress in implementing the Brussels Programme of Action over the previous seven years, especially with regard to GDP growth and poverty reduction, it still faced various challenges, with child and maternal mortality rates remaining relatively high and HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases continuing to pose a serious threat. His Government nonetheless reaffirmed its commitment to achieving the goals of the Brussels Programme of Action, which it had mainstreamed into its Five-Year Strategic Plan 2007-2011. While it acknowledged that it must make every effort to mobilize its domestic development potential, in particular with a view to addressing the issue of poverty by 2010, it still needed the support of the international community as it sought to develop various economic sectors and enhance policy in a number of key areas. The role of development partners in providing the least developed countries with adequate financing and technical assistance to strengthen their productive capacities and remedy structural weaknesses, and the contribution of non-governmental organizations and the private sector were therefore essential.

24. Debt relief was still problematic, since many of the least developed countries with significant debt burdens remained outside the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries and Multilateral Debt Relief initiatives, while the conditionality attached to those initiatives was often difficult to meet. The least developed countries therefore needed to be allowed flexibility in that regard.

25. His delegation believed that the United Nations system had a pivotal role to play in assisting the least developed countries to achieve their objectives and goals. While most United Nations bodies had already mainstreamed the Brussels Programme of Action into their workplans, more concrete programmes and projects on its implementation would be desirable.

26. **Mrs. Beck** (Observer for the Solomon Islands) expressed concern over the fact that, while the Pacific subregion was off-track in meeting the MDGs and other internationally agreed development goals, States in that subregion continued to be recommended for graduation from the list of least developed countries, despite their unique vulnerabilities. The current index formulae therefore needed to be reviewed and the specific vulnerabilities of different groups on the list should be taken into account in assessing their eligibility for graduation.

27. On food security, more assistance should be provided with respect to the transfer of technology to, and infrastructure development in, rural areas to address the problem of low agricultural food production. The least developed countries should also be offered better terms of trade and assistance in capacity-building, particularly in the area of food production. As for energy security, the current high

fuel costs were taking their toll on the national budgets of many least developed countries, especially Pacific small island developing states such as the Solomon Islands, and hindering their ability to sustain economic development. She therefore called for assistance through appropriate technology transfer in the area of energy development, with a particular focus on renewable energy. On the issue of primary health care, her Government needed support in its efforts to tackle the problems of rising child and maternal mortality rates and inadequate access to water and sanitation.

28. Climate change, meanwhile, threatened the very survival and livelihoods of countries such as the Solomon Islands. She therefore called on the international community and the United Nations to facilitate access to resources and technology that would assist her country in adapting to, and mitigating the impact of, climate change on its people's livelihoods. In conclusion, her delegation reiterated the call for a fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries to be held by the end of the decade.

29. **Mr. Exantus** (Haiti), recalling that the Brussels Programme of Action had always been seen as constituting MDGs for the least developed countries, said that those countries were facing ever greater difficulties. Despite the relative progress noted in the Secretary-General's report, living conditions in many least developed countries were now increasingly precarious, and their populations were more vulnerable than ever to external shocks, as illustrated by recent surges in oil prices and the demonstrations sparked off by the food crisis. He called for urgent practical action to ensure full implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action. In that connection, development partners, particularly donor countries, should honour their commitment to meet the target of allocating 0.15-0.20 per cent of gross national product to ODA for the least developed countries by the end of the decade. Without access to adequate resources, the least developed countries would not be able to implement their national policies and strategies, and the modest progress they had worked so hard to achieve could well be reversed.

30. **Mr. Pandey** (Observer for Nepal) expressed concern about the fact that stronger economic growth in the least developed countries had failed to improve the living conditions of the poorest of the poor. While continuing population growth, poor social infrastructure and institutions, food shortages, malnutrition and the constraints inherent in adapting to climate change had held back overall human development, the slow pace of technology transfer and aid mobilization had also hindered socio-economic progress and the least developed countries remained marginalized in the globalization process. The food crisis, rising oil prices and the adverse impact of climate change, increased the likelihood of seeing a reversal in the progress achieved by the least developed countries. Those countries would not therefore be able to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development without investing in infrastructure to develop their productive capacities.

31. Noting that his Government had already integrated the commitments of the Brussels Programme of Action into its development plan and eagerly awaited full implementation of the commitments of developed countries, he called on development partners, especially donor countries, to meet and exceed the target of allocating 0.15-0.20 per cent of GNP to ODA for the least developed countries. Additional resources were vital to those countries, not only for building rural infrastructure and investing in education and capacity-building, but also for taking urgent climate adaptation measures and finding solutions to the food and energy crises. Immediate concrete action from the international community in that regard was therefore necessary.

32. The least developed countries also needed a favourable financial architecture and supportive trade rules. Effective bilateral and multilateral debt relief measures were essential and action should be taken to boost the role of trade in development, for example by providing preferential and unhindered market access for all least developed country products.

33. Following its recent Constituent Assembly election, Nepal was at a crucial stage of political transformation and state restructuring, with priorities including sustainable and inclusive development, governance reform, and infrastructure development. Sustained and scaled-up support from the international community would be critical in enabling it to achieve all its goals.

34. **Mr. Falatar** (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) said that over the biennium 2006-2007 his organization had continued to promote the implementation of the

Brussels Programme of Action, including by contributing to the 2006 midterm comprehensive global review; it had also, in conjunction with other partners, organized two special events for education ministers from least developed countries. The first, in New York, had included a review of how the Education For All Global Action Plan could be used more effectively to implement the Programme of Action, while the second, held during the thirty-fourth session of the General Conference of UNESCO, had given education ministers an opportunity to discuss their countries' priority needs with regard to meeting internationally agreed development goals, including the education-related goals of the Brussels Programme of Action.

35. Among other efforts to promote the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action in coming years, UNESCO would contribute to further improvements in educational quality in the least developed countries, develop enhanced cooperation with the African Union and the Forum of African Parliamentarians for Education, strengthen partnerships with ministries to address literacy issues in national policies and share good practice on women's right to education.

The meeting rose at 4.20 p.m.